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They Told India the Truth About America

by *Andrew Hamilton*

College-student ambassadors in pursuit of Communist lies

They Told India the Truth About America

Condensed from The American Mercury — *Andrew Hamilton*

Last August a handful of students from the University of California at Los Angeles met representatives of six Indian colleges at the Indian Government guesthouse in Trivandrum. There, at the southern tip of India, is a rich agricultural area where rice, coconuts and pineapples grow in abundance — and Communist propaganda flourishes like a bright, poisonous orchid.

It was an argumentative, explosive session. Over cashew nuts and tea the Indians had hurled the usual "loaded" questions, and the Americans had batted them back. Near the end of the evening a slim, intense Indian student arose and thanked the Americans for their hospitality. But within his flowery phrases were the thorns of Marxist propaganda: *Students of all countries should unite and overthrow their imperialistic governments.*

Irv Drasnin, sports editor of the UCLA *Daily Bruin* and chairman of the meeting, jumped to his feet.

"In the United States," he said, "we have a two-party system, but anyone can follow any 'ism' he likes — from Vegetarianism to Hard Moneyism. But these many voices are one in support of democracy. There's one thing we're united on: we believe in orderly evolution — not violence or revolution!"

The Indian students were impressed.

This unique program, called "Project India," was conceived on January 25, 1952, at the University Religious Conference — an all-faith organization. A group of students had gathered to hear Dr. James H. Robinson, a Presbyterian minister just returned from the Orient. Dr. Robinson, a Negro, electrified his listeners by revealing the alarming rash of Communist-inspired misinformation about the United States that he found in India. For example: that 40 Negroes a day are lynched in the United States, and that no

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man with colored skin may own property.

"And what are we doing about it?" he asked bitterly. "Sending leaflets into a country where only 17 percent of the people can read, beaming radio broadcasts in an area where only one tenth of one percent have sets. To combat Communism's monstrous untruths we need a *person-to-person* approach, to give the people of India a real understanding of the United States."

Afterward, some of the students gathered at the home of Adaline Guenther — sprightly, white-haired executive secretary of the University Religious Conference, whom the campus knows fondly as "Gram." The discussion on India continued hotly until Gram asked: "Well, what are you kids going to do about it?"

Dave Lund, chairman of the Junior Prom, replied: "Go to India, of course," and waited for a laugh that never came.

Where to raise money for such a trip? In the weeks that followed, Gram presented the idea of Project India to the State Department, the military, wealthy foundations and individuals. Only one man, Winthrop Rockefeller, was willing to gamble $15,000 on it.

The first summer, 1952, proved successful. Because the project was particularly unusual and promising, the Ford Foundation supplied $23,000 for the 1953 trip and $25,000 for last summer. So, for the past three years, groups of about 12 students, largely from UCLA, accompanied by two adult advisers, have spent their summers in India, studying the Indian student's point of view, and above all, presenting the truth about America. The three groups have talked to 100,000 of India's 300,000 college students and answered countless questions — winning friends for democracy simply by being the good-humored, intelligent, friendly Americans they are.

About 100 ULCA students volunteered for last year's trip. For three months they gave up Friday-night dates to attend seminars on India. Written exams, personality interviews and "stress" tests (to measure psychological reactions) narrowed the group to 11.

The final selection represented a cross section of collegiate America. It included two Negro students, Nira Hardon and Sheila Montgomery, both planning to be teachers, and Yoshio Setoguchi, a Japanese-American pre-med student. Average age of the group: 20 years.

Their arms aching from tropical-disease "shots," notebooks crammed with information about the U. S. political and economic systems, the 1954 Project India group left Los Angeles last June 30 and flew to Bombay.

At the Majestic Hotel a group of Indian reporters met them. "What is America's attitude toward Indo-China?" was the first question. Irv Drasnin and Pierre Mornell sat down on their suitcases and answered questions for three hours. Next morning when they awoke, four

Indians squatted quietly near their beds, waiting to continue the questioning. The students were deluged with invitations to appear at colleges, public ceremonies, teas, Rotary Club meetings and All-India Radio programs.

In a typical presentation in a jam-packed auditorium at Lucknow University, Charlie Decker, pre-law student and veteran of Korea, spoke on "Why We Came" — giving something of the history of Project India. Then Nira Hardon talked about "America's Educational System." Yoshio Setoguchi discussed "Athletics in the United States," emphasizing that only performance is important — not skin color or wealth. Drasnin told about "The American Student's Attitude Toward the Government and the World." No speech lasted more than five minutes.

And then came the barrage of questions. Most were asked out of a desire to learn, but others were political curves adroitly pitched by left-wing professionals. Project India soon learned that the best way to handle any hot question was honestly and straightforwardly.

"Why do you send military aid to Pakistan?"

"The United States offered India the same aid and you turned it down," came the answer. "Any time Pakistan threatens to use arms against India, our Government will cut off military aid and take the quarrel to the United Nations. One more thing: India gets about five times as much economic aid from the United States as does Pakistan."

The scoffing question was often asked: "Are you really afraid of Communism?"

"You bet we're afraid of Communism!" was the quick reply. "We've seen it take over country after country and crush the liberties and lives of millions of people. We don't want that to happen in the United States."

Another frequent question: "Why did the Americans drop the A-bomb on the dark-skinned people of Japan and not upon the white-skinned Germans?"

The answer recounted the facts of history: Germany surrendered in early May 1945, but the A-bomb was not completed until about two months later.

Here are two other favorites:

Q. *Why doesn't the United States favor the entry of Red China into the United Nations?* A. We don't think that any nation should be allowed to shoot its way into an organization dedicated to peace.

Q. *Why is America trying to force India to join SEATO?* A. When you're invited to a party, you don't have to accept. India was invited to join SEATO and is *not* being forced to join.

Not all the questions were serious. One day Drasnin caught this one: "Why do American students like Marilyn Monroe?"

He replied: "For the same reasons you do," and the Indians laughed appreciatively.

Indian students (some of whose history books, incidentally, stop at 1919) were astounded that Nira Hardon and Sheila Montgomery wore the same clothes as white Americans, attended a state university, were preparing to be teachers. But they seemed even more impressed by the common courtesies accorded these Negro girls by the men students — opening doors for them, carrying their bundles.

"That helps answer my doubts about the treatment of Negroes in the United States," one Indian student said later.

At the close of each visit to an Indian school, the Americans solemnly presented the president with a blue-and-gold UCLA pennant bearing the University seal and motto, "Let There Be Light," and a copy of the freshman handbook. These gifts were warmly accepted.

Indian students are political-minded for two reasons: (1) they have been closely tied to India's intense nationalism from the anti-British days of 1942 to the present; and (2) because of lack of extra-curricular activities such as football, dramatics and dances, political discussion is the major sport.

This is a setup made to order for the Communists, and they have moved in to capitalize upon the average student's lack of information about the United States. But the great mass of Indian students is still uncommitted. They are eager to learn more about the United States, and were astonished at the facts and points of view presented by Project India.

The American students did their best work by being informal. They found it easier to make a convincing point when eating rice and curry with their fingers or engaging in a good old "chew-the-rag" session. The "personality approach," as they called it, was more effective than cold logic or polished phrases.

Before leaving the United States, the UCLA group had talked with representatives of the State Department and the Indian Embassy — and thus knew the official points of view. But when they disagreed with the State Department they said so. When they split among themselves, for example, over arms to Pakistan — they presented the conflicting points of view.

In a democracy, Indian listeners noted, many points of view can exist: freedom of speech and belief is far better than rigid party-line dogma. The fact that all three Project India groups have been private citizens, privately financed, with no suspicion of Government sponsorship has been a significant factor in their effectiveness in nailing Communist lies about America.

One of the best ways to break the ice with Indian students, the visitors discovered, was to accept a challenge to a game of basketball or volleyball. In a rousing contest skin color, nationality and religion were forgotten — and it became just one bunch of sweaty guys trying to score points on another.

And singing. Indians are a highly musical people, and Project India members knew they'd be asked to harmonize. So they came prepared: college songs, Negro spirituals, western songs, popular tunes. They always closed a song fest with "America the Beautiful" — and then shamelessly won the hearts of their audience by singing the Indian national anthem, "*Jana Gana Mana.*"

Building schoolhouses is becoming a Project India tradition. On seven hot, wet monsoon mornings the UCLA gang laid a mud foundation, lashed a bamboo frame into place and hammered a tin roof on a schoolhouse for the Rishra Refugee Colony near Calcutta.

Manual labor is scorned by most Indian students. At first, there were only three or four curious onlookers. But the Americans sang and joked as they worked — explaining that thousands of students in the United States earn all or part of their college expenses. At the end of a week about 30 Indian students had pitched in to help.

By September 10, when the group flew home, they had made a 5000-mile swing around India, had kept 16-hour-a-day speaking schedules, and their average weight loss was 12 pounds.

Thomas J. Needham, Jr., Public Affairs Officer of the U. S. Information Agency in Calcutta, declared that the 1954 visit was "fabulous." An American newspaperman in Bombay said, "This is worth a million dollars to the U. S. A." And not long ago Chester Bowles, ex-ambassador to India, said, "We need a half dozen Projects India next summer."

The Communists had taken sharp notice of Project India, railing against it in Party newspapers and sending professional hecklers to ask embarrassing questions whenever the Americans spoke. At Chengannur, forged telegrams were sent to cancel visits by the students to four outlying colleges.

The impact made by Project India last summer might be summed up in what a Communistically inclined law student in Calcutta said.

"I may not agree with everything you say, or what your country does," he remarked thoughtfully. "But now I know that you Americans are sincere, intelligent and honest. There is much in what you believe that finds a response in my heart."

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